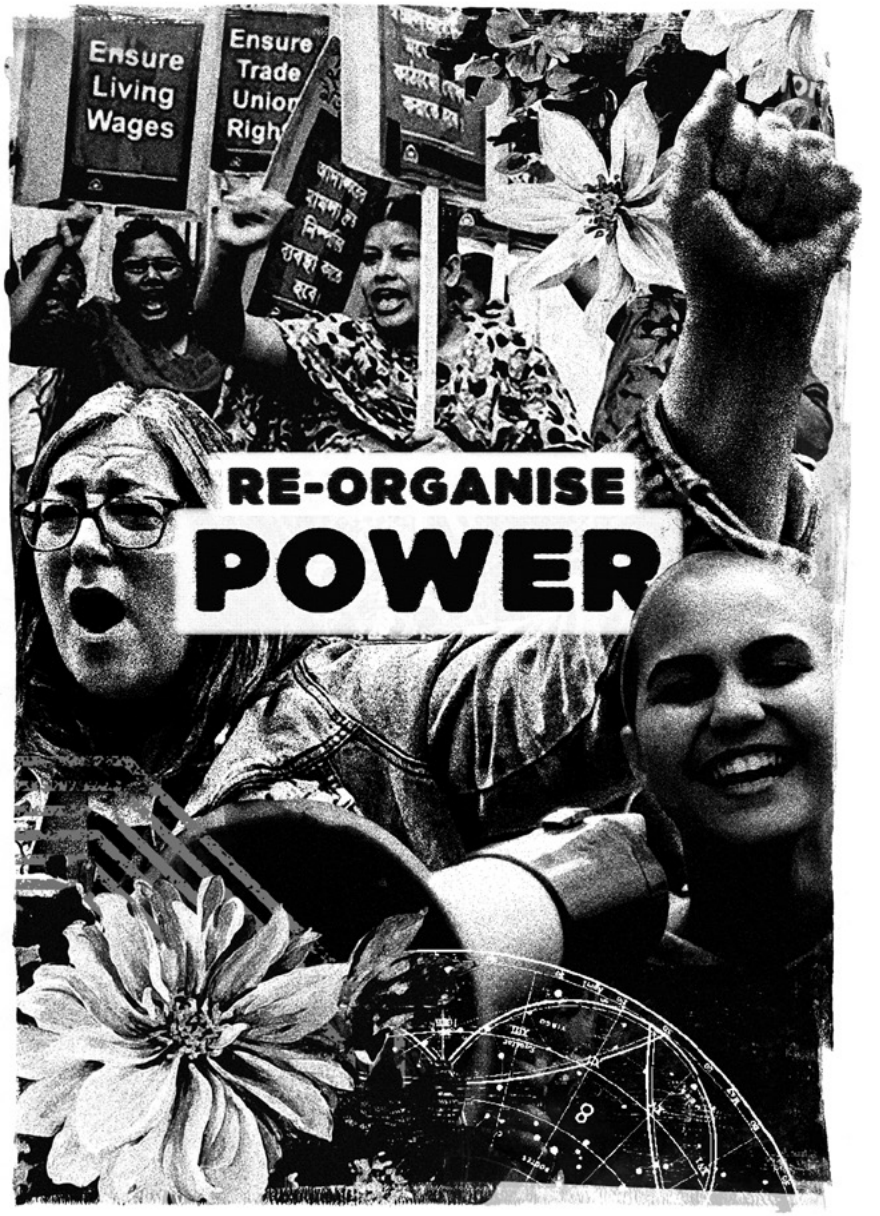
RE-ORGANISE

A GUIDE FOR COOPERATIVES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Conversations in this booklet feature Mikhail Bakunin, Errico Malatesta, Louise Michel and Lucy Parsons.

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RE-ORGANISE

Re-Organise is a project aimed at promoting alternative ways of organising. Organising differently means critically examining the habits, norms, expectations, and demands of the mainstream ways of doing business and proactively exploring and experimenting with new ones.

Re-Organise is developed by the Loughborough University Cooperative Organisation Development Programme (LUCOOP), which brought together academics and cooperative development bodies to produce this and the other booklets in the series.

This is one small piece of a much larger struggle to help us re-organise not just our organisations, but how we live together as a society.

To get updates from Re-Organise and to join the conversation about how this booklet is being used, sign up to our newsletter at:

re-organise.org

TAKE THE POWER BACK... AND MOVE IT FORWARD

In this booklet we discuss what power is, where it comes from, and why it is so often problematic. But we will also look at ways that power can be viewed and used more co-operatively. If you're interested in thinking about power, you're curious as to how power can be less damaging, or you're seeking to reflect on the forms of power currently present within your organisation, then this booklet is for you.

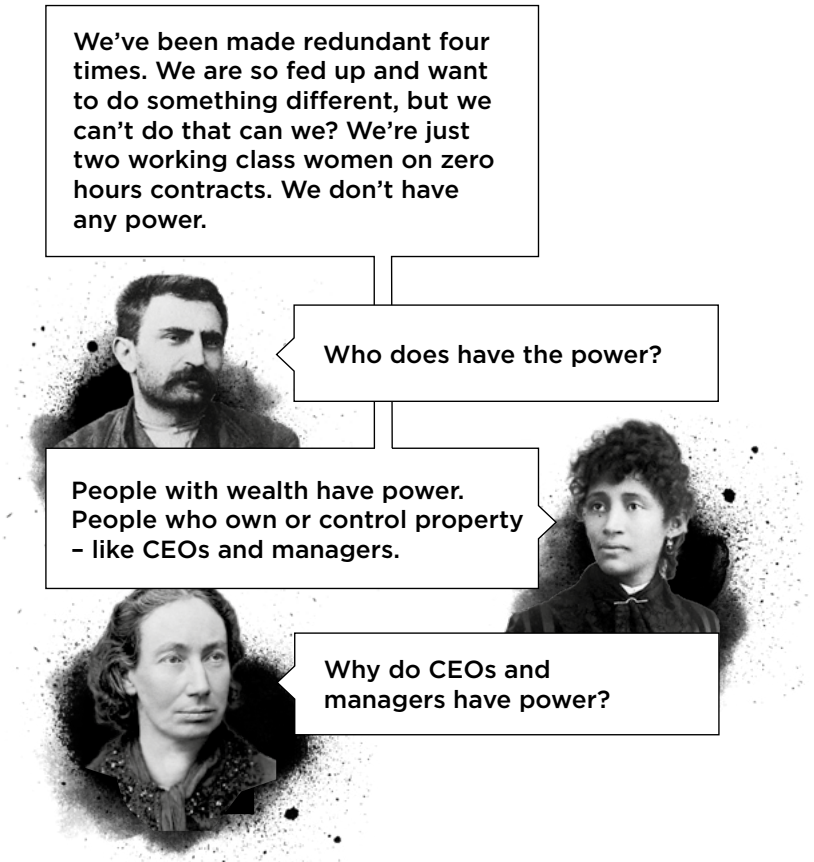
Power is often understood in terms of the extent to which someone can get someone else to do what they want them to do. This might mean making someone act against their own interests, or even manipulating what those interests are, but the essence is that power is something that someone has and can exercise over others. This is sometimes known as 'power-over'.

'Power-over' is held by those who have control over resources and decision-making. In most businesses, it is bosses and managers who have this power. Your employer has power over you through your employment

contract (legal power), your pay-cheque and promotions (reward power) and through the ability to discipline or even sack you (punishment, or coercive power). In these organisations, power is concentrated at the top of the organisational hierarchy, with the most senior managers having the most power.

Of course, power is not always this straightforward.

In a normal organisation, power ultimately rests with the owners. But the question of who holds power will also depend on who can shape the agenda and determine what is open for discussion and what is not. Think of a meeting to discuss which department gets a certain share of the operating budget. The chair and secretary will have power to, for example, determine what issues make it onto the agenda and which do not. Once in the meeting, who holds power will depend on who can shape and control the outcome of a decision. If one departmental head is more persuasive, has influence over the other heads, or is chairing the meeting, then they may have more power to shape that decision.

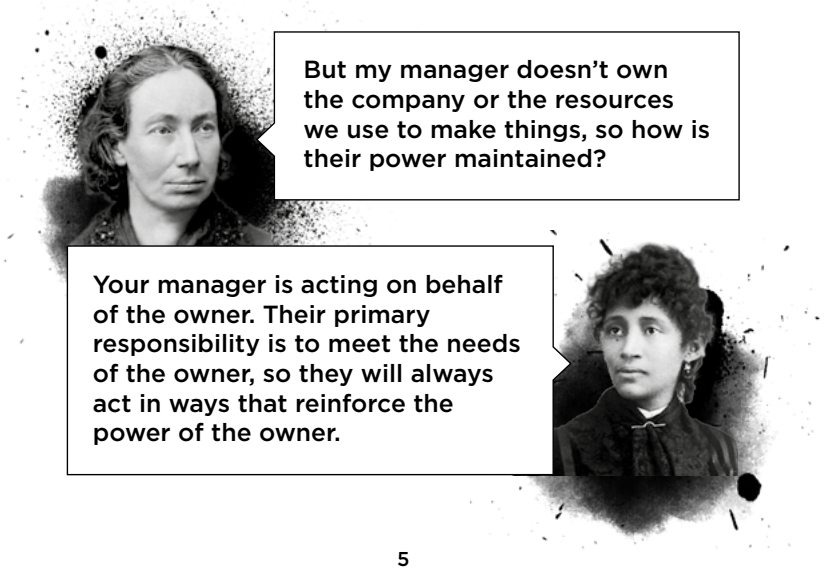

We've been made redundant four times. We are so fed up and want to do something different, but we can't do that can we? We're just two working class women on zero hours contracts. We don't have any power.
Who does have the power?
People with wealth have power. People who own or control property – like CEOs and managers.
Why do CEOs and managers have power?

To answer this question, we need to take a step back and look at the economy as a whole.

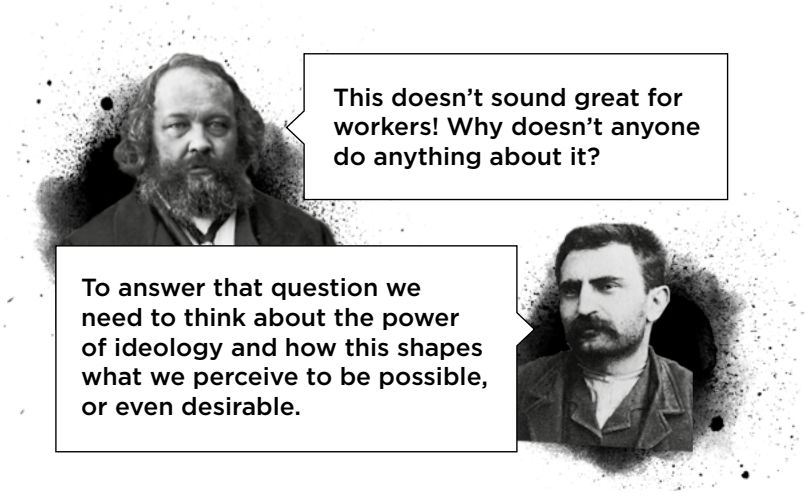
The capitalist economy is based on the private ownership of three key things:

- The means of production (anything that goes into the production process, including land, property – like factories and machinery – labour and resources – like the raw materials)
- The commodities produced (whatever comes out of the production process that is going to be sold)
- Any profit generated from the sale of those commodities.

At its most basic, power is held by those who have control over these three elements. The ownership structure of the capitalist economy puts control in the hands of a few wealthy individuals.


But my manager doesn't own the company or the resources we use to make things, so how is their power maintained?
Your manager is acting on behalf of the owner. Their primary responsibility is to meet the needs of the owner, so they will always act in ways that reinforce the power of the owner.

Managers might not have control over resources like an owner does, but in hierarchical organisations they do have control over decision-making. As an agent of the owner, they have the power to make decisions that benefit the owner. They can decide, for example, to make workers redundant in order to maximise profit for the owner.


This doesn't sound great for workers! Why doesn't anyone do anything about it?
To answer that question we need to think about the power of ideology and how this shapes what we perceive to be possible, or even desirable.

We can think about ideology as a way in which people understand the world, their position in it, and their interests. If people are taught in school that capitalism and economic growth is the route to prosperity, and that hierarchical organising is the only means to achieving these ends, the power of management will appear to be obvious and inevitable. Other forms of organising that are non-hierarchical will be viewed with suspicion.

Similarly, if a person is taught that the world is a competitive place where the winner takes all, then they will enter the workplace as a battleground, seeing their colleagues as competitors. Children aren't told this directly, but in countless subtle ways we learn that this is what is natural and normal. This shapes the way people approach a meeting or a negotiation: as a zero-sum game that requires them to get other people to work towards their desired goal. Others are viewed as means to achieving their ends, rather than someone they could collaborate with so that they both benefit.

If people approach organisations as a collaborative, collective project, however, they will treat their colleagues in a very different way: as people to cooperate with, rather than compete against. This also means they will approach a discussion in a meeting in a very different way.

SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE NOW?

First, capitalist structures of ownership and control are inherently exploitative. Because workers don't own or control the means to produce what is necessary for them to survive (they have to buy food and pay rent), they have little choice but to sell their labour (their time and their capacity to work) to those with greater wealth. In exchange for their labour the worker receives a wage that is, roughly, based on how much it costs the worker to buy the necessities for a basic standard of living (hence the 'living wage').

But the worker produces value that exceeds their wages: the owner sells the commodities the worker produces or the service the worker provides for more than they pay the worker. This is where profit comes from. This additional value, known as 'surplus value', becomes the property of the owner. The manager, as an agent of the capitalist owner, takes steps to maximise surplus value by pushing down wages, exerting more control over workers through surveillance and performance management, and by introducing new technologies. These are all ways of getting more value – and so more profit – from what a worker produces for a smaller amount that has to be paid to the worker.

Second, capitalist structures of ownership and control result in ever-growing inequality. As wages get pushed down in order to increase the profit, those that own the means of production get richer while those who have to sell their labour power do not.

Third, the hierarchical structures of control that enable a person to enact power over others exclude some voices at the expense of others. In this sense, power-over is the 'power of exclusion'. This results in uniform and standardised thinking that stifles creativity, closes off possibilities for alternative actions, and results in a lack of diversity.

> **I was working for a large corporate music venue for almost 4 years, and it eventually became clear to me the company I was working for had very little interest in Sheffield as a city, nor in its people or local economy, and that my role offered me little or no opportunity to influence this. I felt more and more of my energy was being spent simply helping to make some already wealthy people become even wealthier.**

Does it have to be this way? No!

Is there another way? Yes!

HOW IS COOPERATIVE POWER DIFFERENT?

Cooperative power challenges the inevitability of hierarchical organising, and the problems that come with having 'power-over' someone or something.

Cooperative power is about harnessing 'power-to', 'power-with', and 'power-within' to achieve common or shared goals. In contrast to power-over, cooperative power is understood as:

- A process: an energy that rises and falls, and moves between people, rather than something exercised by an individual.
- An act of collective empowerment and mutual benefit rather than a zero-sum game.

POWER-TO

Power-to is the simplest form of power. It is, simply, the ability to do things. Power-over can be understood as a subset of power-to. Power-over is the power-to do things through control, coercion, and domination. As we saw above, when

exercised as power-over, power-to is a zero-sum game where one person takes power and in the process denies (but never eliminates) the power of others. Power-to, however, doesn't have to be exercised as power-over. If based on mutual support and cooperation, power-to takes on a new meaning, as an act of empowerment, a means to achieve common goals, and an opportunity to resist power-over.

POWER-WITH

Power-with is about harnessing collective ability and empowerment to address common concerns and meet common goals and needs. It is founded on a commitment to equitable relationships that are structured horizontally rather than hierarchically, and that work through a network of relationships rather than through top-down command and control. Through these structures, power is distributed equally, so everyone has a say in the decisions that affect them. It is a 'win-win' form of power that challenges the inevitability of competition by highlighting the transformative power of mutual support, solidarity, and collaboration.

This is not to say that cooperative power is perfect. There is always potential for power-to to become power-over, through the development of formal or 'hidden' hierarchies. But this is less likely to happen when power-to is generated in an atmosphere of power-with. By providing opportunities for discussion and input, this can keep negative forms of

power in check. There are plenty of other resources on our website that can help you promote power-to and power-with.

POWER-WITHIN

Power-within is power that arises from self-respect, and a sense of agency and hope. It is founded in, and contributes to, a feeling that together we can do things. Power-within is closely linked to power-with and power-to in a regenerative cycle. While power-over dampens power-within, power-with creates the conditions of solidarity and collective strength that enable power-within to regenerate.

HOW DOES COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP CHANGE POWER?

In the vast majority of the organisations that extract the raw materials, produce the goods, and provide the services that we need to survive and prosper, the number of owners is much smaller than the number of workers who are providing their physical and mental labour to keep those operations going. And yet, within these organisations the workers have no power to change the way they work. The hierarchical relations that are imposed mean that someone other than the productive labourer has power over the production process.

Collective ownership therefore is one of the most important steps in spreading the 'power-to' among all of the workers, which can result in replacing the 'power-over' with 'power-with'. The key contrast here is that the organisation is no longer owned by a single individual or a small group of individuals, but rather by its members. This does not mean that every single individual has the power to act as they see fit, without concern for the rest of the membership, but it does mean that no individual has power-over someone else. As a collective, however, the worker-members have the ultimate power to organise their workspace, to direct their operations, and to control their surplus labour in the

form of the profit they make. As we will see, the way in which this power is exercised can vary considerably.

There are lots of different types of organisation that are collectively owned – worker coops, multi-stakeholder coops, etc. Check out our website for more information.

Collective ownership effectively allows for worker control over the processes and outcomes of production (how and what will be produced), and how any surplus or profit will be shared. Some examples of collective control include: getting together as a group to discuss and take actions; setting up consensus or consent oriented decision-making processes; scrutinising and voting on strategic proposals brought forward by elected representatives; and opening up spaces of deliberation on shared aspirations and responsibilities. The common ground is that no individual has power over another, and that power is shared among all the members.

Collective control therefore facilitates and protects power-with by distributing power between workers and necessitating cooperation and collaboration. Through this, it creates conditions of solidarity and collective empowerment that support the emergence of power-within. Ideally, those exercising collective control can connect with others doing the same thing, turning individual collectives into a much stronger movement. We say more about this in our booklet on **strategy**.

Of course, this is not always so simple. Sharing 'power-with' is an ongoing process of discussion, negotiation and understanding amongst the people involved. It requires members to seek common ground, to identify shared goals, and to be aware that their personal empowerment stems from their collective control and not from any hierarchical position (their power-to comes from their power-with). Even though this at times can be hard to maintain, it is important to remember that it is only through collective control that people can overcome oppressive and hierarchical systems of power that allow a few individuals to rule over the majority. Collective control, when combined with collective ownership, can safeguard cooperative power and democratic decision-making.

WHAT IS COLLECTIVE AUTONOMY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

When people use the term autonomy, they often mean the ability to act according to their own values and interests, to act as they choose. When we talk about autonomy in the context of collective ownership and collective control, the word takes on a slightly different meaning.

We have seen that collective ownership and collective control create the conditions for power-to to be exercised as power-with rather than power-over, and for the regeneration of power-within. We have also seen that having collective ownership and control does not mean that an individual has the power to act as they see fit without concern for others. A core foundation of power-within is the feeling that we can achieve more – for the group but also for ourselves – by doing things together and acting towards a common goal.

So what exactly is collective autonomy?

Collective autonomy is about acting with regard for others, and feeling responsibility for others.

OK. So collective autonomy means thinking about my own needs but also thinking about the needs of others?

Yes exactly, because in a collective my needs and your needs are interconnected. If I just decided that I wanted to finish work at 2pm every day, other people in the collective would need to do extra work on my behalf and the collective might end up suffering. That isn't good for me, or for anyone else in the collective.

MOVING FORWARDS

In this booklet, we've explored the negative implications and positive possibilities of power. We hope it's been useful. Ultimately, it's putting these things into practice that is the really important, and really challenging, part.

We hope this booklet has helped you start thinking about the pitfalls and possibilities we face when we try to organise differently. Whether you're starting off, or an old hand, we want to promote a culture of critical questioning, not just of the capitalist world out there, but of some of our own habits and assumptions.

We've got two other booklets in this series:

- **GOVERNANCE**
- **STRATEGY**

You can get them direct from Dog Section Press or find them along with links to further resources and advice on our website.

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